



Pablo Picasso, 1937: "Guernica"

Lenin on the Theory of Knowledge

The Criterion of Practice in the Theory of Knowledge

Lenin's 1908 "[Materialism and Empirio-Criticism](#)" is a full-length book, but a difficult one to include under any particular category. It is a polemic against [Ernst Mach](#) and his Russian followers, whom Lenin said had little to distinguish themselves from the 18th-century subjective idealist [Bishop Berkeley](#). This controversy does not seem quite so important today as it appears to have been in 1908, but it is still useful.

Our text from Lenin's book is "[The Criterion of Practice in the Theory of Knowledge](#)" (download linked below).

It begins: "*We have seen that Marx in 1845 and Engels in 1888 and 1892 placed the criterion of practice at the basis of the materialist theory of knowledge.*" This shows up some of our difficulty in the field of Marxian philosophy. As the footnote says, Lenin is referring to Marx's "[Theses on](#)

[Feuerbach](#)” (1845) and to the works by F. Engels: “[Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy](#)” (1888) and the “[Special Introduction to the English Edition of 1892](#)” of his “[Socialism: Utopian and Scientific](#)”.

The latter pamphlet is made out of excerpts from Engel’s “[Anti-Dühring](#)”, while the “Theses on Feuerbach” are part of “[The German Ideology](#)”, a book written between 1845 and 1847 by Marx and Engels and then abandoned “to the gnawing criticism of the mice”.

Karl Marx had a Doctorate in Philosophy but he did not, as a “Marxist”, write a book of philosophy as such, except insofar as his long “Capital” project could be taken as philosophy, and there are indeed some overtly philosophical statements here and there among the preparatory works and in the three originally-published volumes of “Capital”.

So, what is linked from this post already comprises the major part of the overt philosophical work of Marx, Engels and Lenin. It is a tiny amount when compared to the world’s literature on philosophy.

It is therefore clear that the classical Marxist literature does not provide us with a full, exclusively Marxist exposition of philosophy. Perhaps this is fitting, because Marxism is after all not outside of the main stream of learning. As we have seen, it is a continuation of, as well as a reaction to, Hegel’s work, while Hegel’s work stands in a similar relation to Kant’s, and so on.

Taken together, all of this means that for the kind of philosophy that is necessary for revolution, the revolutionaries will have to go beyond Marx and Engels, and study the full discipline of philosophy, its history, its development and its meaning. This is exactly what Lenin began to do in the early 1900s.

In “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism” Lenin quotes Hegel several times in passing, and briefly, though not in this particular chapter. It would seem that Lenin’s interest in Hegel really only got going later, at about the time (1914) when he prepared his ‘[Conspectus of Hegel’s book “The Science of Logic”](#)’. The Lenin Philosophy Archive on MIA [is here](#).

Lenin is saying in this short chapter that that the test of truth is practice, and this provides us with a continuity in relation to our previous instalment, from Ilyenkov.

The next part will be the last in this Hegel series.

Picture: Pablo Picasso’s “[Guernica](#)”. Picasso was the most distinguished painter of the 20th Century, and a communist. His famous mural depicting the fascist aerial bombing of the Spanish village of Guernica is now at the United Nations.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Criterion of Practice in the Theory of Knowledge, Lenin, 1908](#).
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